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[Back to Index](#) Published on 11/25/02

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## BR's Old Arsenal

*Historic structure has survived two attempts to tear it down*

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Advocate staff photo by  
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 **The Old Arsenal,** photographed from the observation deck of the State Capitol, was built in 1838 as a powder magazine for the storage of gunpowder and ammunition for the U.S. Army garrison at the Pentagon Barracks.

Standing in the shadow of Huey Long's modern State Capitol is one of the area's oldest and most historic buildings, the Old Arsenal.

Built as a powder magazine for the storage of gunpowder and ammunition, it is one of only five structures that remain from an important 19th-century U.S. military post located on the site of the capitol grounds.

"This is some of the most hallowed ground in Louisiana," local historian and writer William A. Spedale said. "A lot of history took place on that property."

On two different occasions, the Old Arsenal was to be demolished. Long first wanted the property for a sunken rose garden. Then the state wanted

### Index

[Home](#)  
[Business](#)  
[Classifieds](#)  
[Leisure](#)  
[Marketplace](#)  
[News](#)  
[Obituaries](#)  
[Site Map](#)  
[Sports](#)  
[Weather](#)

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### People extras:

[Louisiana Ancestors](#)

to build a new state library there. Both times, local citizens saved the building, probably because it was generally believed that it originated from the time of Spanish rule.

Although not from Louisiana's Spanish period, the Old Arsenal is important because of the historic significance of the garrison and because the Old Arsenal is the only powder magazine remaining of four that were built there.

"The western boundary of the United States at one time went only as far as the Mississippi River," Spedale said. "This military post was a good staging area for troops and supplies for anything that went on in the southwestern part of the U.S."

### **The Early Fort**

The first powder magazine was built by the British around 1763 in a dirt fort called Fort New Richmond, which was located on the banks of the Mississippi River at the present site of the Pentagon Barracks. Spanish forces under Gov. Bernardo de Galvez captured the fort in 1779 and renamed it Fort San Carlos.



□ **Graffiti written by a Union soldier during the Civil War is preserved on a wall of the Old Arsenal.**

In 1810, West Florida revolutionaries under Gen. Philemon Thomas seized the fort and threw the Spanish out of the area, establishing the independent Republic of West Florida. On Dec. 10, 1810, the citizens of West Florida allowed the American flag to be raised over the fort when "the short-lived Republic of West Florida was absorbed by the United States," Spedale said.

### **The U.S. Garrison**

In 1819, the U.S. Army began construction of the military garrison called the Pentagon Barracks. The second powder magazine was built of brick on the garrison. However, a general inspecting the post in 1827 reported to authorities that he felt that this magazine was too close to the Pentagon and that another powder magazine surrounded with a thick brick wall should be built in a safer place.

The third powder magazine, the Old Arsenal, was built from specifications sent from Washington, D.C., in 1836. The specifications, now in the National Archives in Washington, called for "a Magazine 105 feet long and 35 feet wide 12 feet high above the ground. The foundation to be 3 feet deep and 10 feet 6 wide to be filled in between the floor joists

with charcoal, the walls above ground to be 4 feet 6 in. thick...."

The entire building, completed in 1838, was surrounded by a tall brick wall "built to deflect explosives," Spedale said. The magazine held from 2,500 to 3,000 barrels of gunpowder.

Packed in the foundation between the floor joists were 832 barrels of charcoal. "The charcoal acted like cotton and the little thing in a pill bottle that absorbs moisture," Spedale said. "The magazine was absolutely moisture free and fireproof."

The barrels of charcoal rested on a brick floor. "If the water came up from the river, it could sink down through the brick," said Lewis Morris, assistant director of the Louisiana State Archives, a division of the office of the Secretary of State, which now oversees the building.

The interior of the magazine was made up of a series of arches. "It's my understanding that the arches would deflect an explosion vertically rather than horizontally," said Gregory Leggio, curator of the Old Arsenal Museum, now located in the building.



□ **Curator Gregory Leggio, right, is shown in the Old Arsenal Museum with Lewis Morris, left, assistant director of the Louisiana State Archives, and local historian and writer William A. Spedale.**

In 1837, the U.S. War Department stationed a regiment of infantry, an artillery company and six companies of cavalry at Baton Rouge, which became the main ordnance depot for the southwestern part of the U.S. Ammunition was sent in and out to supply forts on the lower Mississippi River and at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico.

Zachary Taylor served as commander of the post, and most of the country's leading generals including Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, George B. McClellan, George H. Thomas, George A. Custer and P.G.T. Beauregard visited or served there.

After the Mexican War, huge supplies of surplus ordnance were shipped to Baton Rouge for storage. The two existing powder magazines on the site were filled. In 1850, a fourth powder magazine, similar in shape and design to the Old Arsenal, was built at the post.

Because the substances stored in powder magazines were so volatile, the

U.S. Army specified rigid safety rules for working there. "The sentinel or guard at a magazine should have no firearm, and everyone who enters should take off his shoes or put socks over them: no sword, or cane, or anything which might occasion sparks, should be carried in," the U.S. Army Ordnance Manual for 1862 stated.

"Most all of the rules were written to protect against a spark or fire or to prevent dampness," Leggio said.

### **Civil War**

On Jan. 10, 1861, the fort was seized by the Louisiana Militia, which raised the flag of the independent state of Louisiana. "In accordance with an arrangement entered into with the commanding officer, in the presence of a force too large to be resisted, Baton Rouge Barracks and Arsenal, with all federal property therein was turned over to me on the 11th and 12th instant, and on the 13th, the Federal troops departed," Gov. Thomas O. Moore wrote in January 1861 in his annual address to the Louisiana General Assembly. An original copy of the address can be found in the Louisiana State Archives.

Moore goes on to describe an "application from the Governor of Mississippi for aid in arms and munitions of war.... The interests of the two States are so intimately associated in the common cause of the South, that I deemed it my duty, not only from considerations of courtesy to a sister State, but in further execution of my duty to Louisiana, regarding the approaches of Federal troops from above, to comply with his request."

When Louisiana joined the Confederacy in March 1861, the fort became a Confederate garrison.

On May 9, 1862, the federal gunboat Iroquois appeared at Baton Rouge and took possession of the town without resistance. Federal troops used the fort as a staging post for the Battle of Baton Rouge on Aug. 5, 1862.

Federal forces occupied the fort until June 5, 1879, when they moved out leaving an ordnance caretaker. The magazine was then rented to private companies for storage of gunpowder.

"The fort lost its significance when Texas became part of the United States," Spedale said. "It never went back to being a garrison again. The frontier post moved farther west."

### **LSU years**

In 1886, LSU leased the abandoned post from the Department of the Interior and moved the university to the old garrison. In 1902, the university was given full title to the property by act of Congress.

LSU first used the Old Arsenal as a dormitory and later as a veterinary hospital as part of the school's agriculture curriculum. It may also have been used for the storage of library materials.

From 1925-1932, LSU moved from the old campus at the Pentagon Barracks to the present campus.

### **The state Capitol**

In 1930, Huey Long began building his new skyscraper capitol. Most of the old LSU buildings and those of the military post were torn down. That included the 1850 powder magazine. "The graves of some 200 soldiers who had been buried on the post were unknowingly scooped away, and the cemetery was obliterated," Spedale said. "The only buildings and edifices to survive construction of the new capitol were the Pentagon Barracks, the Arsenal and an Indian mound."

Long had plans for the Old Arsenal, too. He wanted a sunken rose garden built on the site. However, a group of local citizens protested, and the building stayed.

"Thank God it was preserved when they built the capitol," Spedale said. "They totally obliterated everything on the grounds."

The Old Arsenal was used as National Guard headquarters, as a pistol range for the State Police and then as a storage warehouse for the city-parish. Finally the building was abandoned.

Spedale remembers climbing inside the building as a child. "It was a storage place," he said, "filled with street garbage cans."

### **Restoration**

Later the state developed plans to build the state library at the site of the Old Arsenal. This time, the Baton Rouge Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution stepped in, and again the building was saved.

In 1949, the DAR and other interested parties began to think about converting the Old Arsenal into a museum. In January 1960, the DAR led by Virgie Tucker, one of the ladies who had saved the Old State Capitol, began an active campaign to restore the building as a museum.

Through the combined efforts of the Louisiana Society of the DAR, the State Tourist Development Commission, the Board of Liquidation of the State Debt and the Baton Rouge City-Parish Council, along with contributions from many individuals, the building was cleaned and refurbished.

Cleaning the building was no easy task. The walls were covered with graffiti written by both Union and Confederate soldiers who had been stationed there. "Most of the graffiti was destroyed in the restoration," Spedale said. "They didn't realize what it was."

Workers did manage to save one section of graffiti, a humorous reference to Confederate Gen. John C. Breckinridge, who was unable to drive the Union forces from the city during the Battle of Baton Rouge. It is signed with the initials "A.G.A." from the 6th Michigan Volunteers. From the initials, historians believe that the graffiti was written by Abram G.

Amsden, who was stationed at the post during the Union occupation.

On July 1, 1962, the Old Arsenal Museum opened with the theme "Louisiana Under Ten Flags." Within the exterior brick wall surrounding the building was a new brick walkway made of bricks from the ruins of The Cottage, one of the great Louisiana plantation homes, which burned in 1960. The bricks were donated to the state by Fairfax Bailey and Fannie Reynaud.

Mrs. Tucker and her committee planned 10 permanent exhibits in the museum, each portraying one of the flags which flew over the building in its history. Temporary exhibits also contained items pertaining to the history of the state including a collection of early maps, paintings, early furniture and sculpture.

In 1973, the Old Arsenal was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Exhibits at the Old Arsenal Museum remained basically the same for more than 25 years, when in 1992, the building underwent another restoration under the auspices of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, which installed hands-on exhibits depicting the history and significance of the building.

The office of Secretary of State W. Fox McKeithen took over operation of the museum under an agreement with the Legislative Budget Control Council and the foundation.

On April 30, 1992, the newly restored museum reopened. "Mr. McKeithen is most dedicated to the idea of having the museum system under the Secretary of State's office," said Morris. "Because he studied history, the arsenal is very important to him."

Last year alone, Leggio showed more than 6,000 visitors through the historic building. Children especially love the hands-on exhibits and often pose for photos in a special area set up with barrels like those that held the gunpowder for the garrison.

"People are always asking me about an underground tunnel that is said to run from the arsenal to the Mississippi River," Leggio said. Generations of visitors have inquired about the tunnel.

"It's a myth," said Spedale, who believes that the story may have something to do with an old drawing that showed drains going into the river.

Through all its many uses, the building remains in remarkably good condition for its 164 years. "Back then the government built quality," Morris said.

"It will last forever if they just leave it alone," Spedale added.

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**Old Arsenal open for tours**

The Old Arsenal Museum, on the grounds of the State Capitol, is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Admission is \$1 for adults and 50 cents for children 6-17. Children under 6 and seniors older than 60 are admitted free.

[Top of page](#)

<% Randomize Rnum = (Rnd) %>

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#### SITE INDEX

HOME: [About Us](#) | [Archives](#) | [Help](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Subscribe](#)

NEWS: [AP Wire](#) | [Elections](#) | [Health news](#) | [Legislature](#) | [Photo Gallery](#) | [Police Briefs](#) | [Religion](#) | [School News](#) | [Schools: Desegregation](#) | [Science](#) | [Smiley](#)

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NEWS: [River parishes](#) | [Westside](#)

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[Team Schedules](#)

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